

**LENDO CELAN NO BRASIL: A RECEPÇÃO DE CELAN EM *LOGOCAUSTO*, DE  
LEANDRO SARMATZ  
READING CELAN IN BRAZIL: CELAN RECEPTION IN *LOGOCAUSTO*, BY  
LEANDRO SARMATZ**

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**Resumo**

Este artigo aborda a recepção de Paulo Celan no cenário poético brasileiro contemporâneo, tomando como exemplo a poética típica de Celan presente em *Logocausto* (2009), de Leandro Sarmatz. Sugiro que os dois poetas compartilham de uma preocupação profunda com a destruição do judaísmo europeu, que moldou suas respectivas poéticas de maneira semelhante. Minha análise investigará o motivo poético de presentear e retratará o processo de recepção como um modo de aceitação ou de recusa do presente, neste caso, tratando-se de um *corpus* linguístico. Em termos históricos, a recepção de Paul Celan em português deve ser analisada em termos de posicionamento da voz poética: enquanto Celan constrói uma poética da extinção a partir da perspectiva do testemunho – isto é, a partir da linguagem do evento – Sarmatz a descreve a partir da perspectiva de um observador envolvido, porém estranho, um tradutor.

**Palavras-chave:** Paul Celan, Leandro Sarmatz, pós-memória, tradução, presente.

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the reception of Paul Celan to contemporary Brazilian poetry, as exemplified in Leandro Sarmatz's "Celanic" poetics in *Logocausto* (2009). I will suggest that the two poets share a deep concern with the destruction of European Jewry that shaped their poetics in a similar way. My analysis will investigate the poetic motive of gift-giving and portray the process of reception as a mode of acceptance or rejection of the gift, in that sense one of linguist corpus. In historical terms, the reception of Paul Celan in Portuguese has to be

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analyzed in terms of positioning of the poetic voice: while Celan construes a poetics of extinction from the perspective of testimony – that is, from within the language of the event, Sarmatz is describing it from the perspective of an involved, yet foreign, observer – or a translator.

**Keywords:** Paul Celan, Leandro Sarmatz, Postmemory, translation, gift.

From the perspective of testimony – that is, from within the language of the event, Sarmatz is describing it from the perspective of an involved, yet foreign, observer – or a translator.

In a letter to the editor Hans Bender from 1960, Celan describes poetry as a craft. To be precise, he addresses the integrity necessary for the writing of poetry, by declaring that craft, “like cleanliness in general,” is “the condition of all poetry” (Celan, 2003, p. 25). His letter to Bender served Celan to respond, even if indirectly, on false accusations of plagiarism from Yvan Goll, made by his widow Claire (Felstiner, p. 155). He did so by revising a former understanding of the poet being “dismissed” once the poem is freed into the world, and recharging, instead, his “working hands” back into the poetical space: “Craft,” Celan explains to Bender, “means handiwork, a matter of hands. And these hands must belong to *one* person, i.e. a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness”. (ibid, same. Emphasis in the original).

Yet, it is interesting to note that, even in the midst of the Goll affair, as Celan’s metaphor unfolds it goes further than his efforts to prove authenticity of his texts. What follows isn’t a mere claim for ownership or authorship, but rather an indication to the way they are intrinsically intertwined with issues of intertextuality and reception: “I cannot see,” Celan continues, “any basic difference between a handshake and a poem. [...] Poems are also gifts – gifts to the attentive. Gifts bearing destinies.” (Celan, 2003, p. 26).

The transition from the “working hands” to a “handshake” – inherent to poetry as Celan conceptualized it, leads to the placement of poetry in an intersubjective space, belonging to the poet only as much as it is given, from its very ‘birth,’ to an other. Just as a handshake is meaningless unless taking place between two distinct subjects, it is the very contract it bears – more than any sense of ownership – which Celan pleads to ascribe with integrity and sincerity.

This paper will examine the manifestation of such a ‘contract’ between Celan and the contemporary Brazilian poet Leandro Sarmatz. Following a short overview of Celan path as a poet and his reception in Brazil, I will offer a close reading of the opening poem of Sarmatz’s book, *Logocausto* (2009) and will examine paradigmatic intertextualities it creates with Celan’s poetics. Sarmatz’s attentiveness to Celan’s poetical work, as well as his intrigued preoccupation with the destruction of European Jewry during the Holocaust, and especially with language’s role and ability in articulating it, will be discussed broadly.

Paul Celan (1920-1970) was born into the largely Jewish, German-speaking city of Czernowitz, then Romania. He was a polyglot since childhood and had a high command of Hebrew and French, in addition to German and Romanian. Yet, his poetry remained loyal to German throughout his entire life – a ‘mother tongue’ also in that sense that it was used for the intimate communication he had with his mother, while the father was the one insisting on Hebrew practice and education. He lost both his parents in a Nazi death camp, and was himself sent to a labor camp. Celan spent most of his postwar life in Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970. (Behl, 1995 Felstiner, 1995).

Celan’s debut as a poet was the publication of *Todesfuge* (“Deathfugue”; “Fuga da Morte”) – a poem that has “drawn more passionate attention than any other poem from the war” (Felstiner, 26) and formed the reference point for poetry “after Auschwitz”. *Todesfuge* was first published in a Romanian translation, titled "Tango of Death" in 1947 and appeared in the German original in Celan’s first poetry book, *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (“The Sand from the Urns”) in 1948. Yet, it is far from exhausting Celan’s poetical oeuvre, which amounts to seven volumes that were published between 1952-1968 and three more that appeared posthumously, comprising poems from the estate.

“Arguably the greatest European poet in the postwar period” (Anderson, 2000), Celan’s poetry continues to widely resonate in the Western cultural world until today, 43 years after his death. His reception is deeply integrated in what is known as the “Crisis of representation” of postwar years, which posed a challenge to historical continuity, as well as to the mimetic conventions required for its representation. In Lyotard’s words, the crisis caused by the war can be seen as an earthquake – yet one that “destroyed not only lives, buildings and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes, directly and indirectly” (In: Ginzburg, 1992:96)). Celan’s poetry registers the enormity of this historical upheaval in terms of a struggle over poetic language. By straining it to its limits, he enables a mimesis of the break itself (DeKoven Ezrahi, 1989).

Portuguese translations of Celan’s poetry began to publish in Brazil as early as 1977, when a first anthology of his poems, titled *Poemas*, was prepared by Flávio Kothe, a professor at the University of Brasilia (*Poemas*, Rio de Janeiro, 1977); An extended edition by the same translator and editor, *Hermetismo e Hermenêutica*, has been published 8 years later (*Hermetismo e Hermenêutica*. Rio de Janeiro, 1985). For the sake of the comparison, in Portugal, despite its geographical proximity to Paris and Germany, a first collection, titled

*Sete Rosas mais tarde* was only published in 1993, translated by João Barrento and Yvete Centeno (Lisboa 1993). Barrento's tremendous efforts made possible the publication of two successive volumes, *Arte Poética: O Meridiano e outros textos*, comprising the prose work, speeches and letters in 1996; and *A morte é uma flor*, comprising poems from the literary remains, in 1998 – all widely used today in Brazil as well. A last collection was published in São Paulo in 1999, translated by Claudia Cavalcante (*Cristal*).

Celan's Brazilian readership also initiated critical and interpretative work, beginning with "A poética do silêncio" by Modesto Carone (1979), that offered a comparison between Celan and the major Brazilian poet of the 20th century, João Cabral de Melo Neto; More recently, one finds a close reading of Celan in the works of Juliana P. Perez from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (2004-2007) as well as in articles by Moacir Amâncio (2006), Karin Bakke de Araújo (2010), Vera Lins (2005) and others. The reception was not limited to the academic world; Brazilian poets have recognized the influence of Celan, among them one finds Age de Carvalho, the avant-garde poet, essayist and translator Haroldo de Campos, Leila Danziger and Leandro Sarmatz.

Sarmatz (b.1973) is a journalist, poet and prose writer, playwright and editor. Besides *Logocausto*, published in 2009, he is also the author of a play, *Mães e sogras* (2000), and a collection of short stories titled *Uma fome* (2010). He was born in Porto Alegre and has lived in São Paulo since 2001. A Son of a Jewish family that immigrated from Eastern Europe to Brazil in the 1920s, he was brought up in an atmosphere well integrated into Portuguese language and culture. Yet, his encounter with a history of immigration and foreignness – predominantly experienced via his relationship with his grandmother – manifested the rifts between origin and destination, alienation and belonging, in lingual terms: as Sarmatz recently witnessed, the grandmother "paterna morreu sem falar português – a não ser palavras para a sobrevivência diária, como "carne", "pão", "manteiga".“( 2012.)<sup>2</sup>; It is through this relationship that he also observed the eclipse of Yiddish – a matter that will later become one of his main preoccupations as a writer.

Celan's impact on Sarmatz's poetics was recognized as early as *Logocausto* was published in 2009, and was supported by the author in a recent interview, where he described Celan as one of the sources for his process of formation as a poet. (Ibid) Accompanying the

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<sup>2</sup> “[My grandmother] died without speaking Portuguese, excluding a few day-to-day necessary words like “meat”, “bread”, and “butter”.” (My translation. Henceforth all translations from Portuguese are mine unless stated otherwise).

book's publication, Manuel da Costa Pinto (2009) mentioned, in particular, the “modo enviesado no romeno de expressão alemã Paul Celan” that characterizes this lament;<sup>3</sup> the explicit references of the holocaust; the presence of a Jewish vocabulary and the lyric's tendency to follow marks of trauma “as an ethical commitment to writing” – noting how they all “pode parecer algo deslocado num brasileiro nascido em 1973 e, portanto, distante de acontecimentos tão traumáticos”.<sup>4</sup> The connection between the poets was further examined by Fernando Oliveira Santana Júnior (2012), who dedicated two articles to the similarities in aesthetic representation of the holocaust in Celan's poetics and Sarmatz's *Logocausto*, emphasizing their shared aesthetic of fracture and proposing to understand Sarmatz's book in terms of a “leitura criativa da poesia celaniana.” (74-75)<sup>5</sup>

The book's title, *Logocausto*, is a neologism based on “holocausto” – from ancient Greek: *hólos*, whole; and *kaustós*: burnt, originally meant a religious animal sacrifice in which the victim is completely consumed by fire, utterly destroyed and burnt up. Yet, Sarmatz's consonantal permutation does not simply replace the “whole” or complete burnt with one of *logos*. The full meaning of “holocaust” cannot escape the ear and is kept alongside the new content of the prefix. The outcome is a thickened, affixed meaning of, literally, “a lingual holocaust”: the complete burning of a language that, de facto, points to the extinction of its correlative world, its culture, customs and worldview. As stated by Sarmatz,

E não é a extinção só da língua, afinal, mas da visão de mundo, do ethos, de coisas como humor e lamento, piada e praga. Enfim, um mundo inteiro morreu junto com o idioma, como sabemos desde o final da Segunda Guerra. Essa questão, que para muitos pode soar excessivamente intelectual ou até mesmo artificiosa, para mim tem papel central nas coisas que escrevo e que penso. (Sarmatz, 2012)<sup>6</sup>

A poem of the same title, “Logocausto”, opens the book and will be at the focus of my reading. The poem is an elaborated, fractured and fragile lament dedicated to an extinct existence: that of Yiddish language, which was burnt, together with European Jewry, during

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<sup>3</sup> “The skewed, Celanian style of the verse”

<sup>4</sup> “...might appear as misplaced in the case of a Brazilian author born in 1973 and, therefore, distant from such traumas.”

<sup>5</sup> “A creative reading in Celan's poetry”.

<sup>6</sup> “It is not only the extinction of a language, but of a worldview, of ethos, of things like humor and lamentation, jokes and nuisances. Ultimately, an entire world died with language, since we have known since the end of the Second World War. This question, that for many may sound excessively intellectual or even artificial, plays a central role in what I write and think.”

the Holocaust. It tells the history of destruction from the point of view of language, yet it is important to note here that Sarmatz does not use language as a metonym to the destruction of the actual collective body. On the contrary, the destruction of the language receives a full, ontological, status of itself.

The opening lines read: “Uma língua de mortos. Idioma anti-segreto, a sibilar no espelho seu eco de cova no indo-europeu ainda.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, as the poem progresses it proves to do more than simply echo a dead language, or stand as a gravestone for its absence. The attempt to describe a lost language is, apparently, intrinsically tied with another, literal, meaning of the neologism “logocausto” – namely, the insertion of *logos* – a language or a syntactical logic – into a dead space, or a “holocaust”. The second stanza explicitly addresses the poetic syntax, describing it as a movement between life (symbolized by the sun, source of light and life) and death (symbolized by tombs), with this movement’s only *syntagma*, or progress, being an exilic movement from one of these worlds/poles to the other. Paradoxically, it is only in exile that such syntax can “feel itself at home:

(Luz do leste reprojeta em tumbas: sintaxe que se sente  
em casa. Expulsa  
e vai: expulsa.)<sup>8</sup>

Elaborating on Celan’s preoccupation with life and death – Sarmatz builds on it in three main layers: ontologically, it is considered in terms of an existential question regarding the continuity of life and death, or of ‘that which has passed’ into the present; epistemologically, it addresses a question about language’s capability to *report* such a relation; while poetically, it performs and creates a certain syntax that reflects it. This syntax reflects Celan’s use of syntax in terms of the verse’s degree of compression, its use of oxymora, its ambiguity and its ‘ciphered’ quality.

Yet, it is also important to examine where Sarmatz’s poetics depart from Celan’s and to consider the differences between them. In his discussion of the reception of Celan in Sarmatz’s poetry, Fernando Oliveira Santana Júnior (2012) suggests that these can be best

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<sup>7</sup> “A language of dead. An anti-sacred idiom, in which to murmur in front of a mirror  
Your echo of a grave, in the Hindu-European still.”

<sup>8</sup> “(An Eastern light refracts on tombs: a syntax that feels  
at home. Expelled  
and walks. Expelled.)”

explained on historical grounds, originating from the generational remove between the poets. Júnior employs a distinction between recalling and received memory – originating from Marianne Hirsch’s concept of *Postmemory* (2008), in order to discuss the two poetics as successive manners of the poetics of loss and absence.

In Hirsch’s view, *Postmemory* is a “received” memory, comprised of indirect knowledge which, rather than being mediated by recall, is the outcome of “imaginative investment, projection or creation” (107). Flowingly, Santana Júnior adopts this concept in order to address the different positions of the poetic voice – between that of a witness, on the one hand, and of an observer on the other. Yet, it is important to note here that more than being a general cognitive apparatus, *Postmemory* according to Hirsch is a time- and place-dependent *temporality* – one that characterizes the West “in the end-of-century/turn-of-century moment of looking backwards rather than ahead and of defining present in relation to a troubled past, rather than initiating new paradigms” (ibid, 106), and is limited to Holocaust literature of the second generation. Leaving aside the conceptual challenges posed by this concept itself,<sup>9</sup> what is at greater stake here is its application, by Santana Júnior, on the poetry of a contemporary, third generation to the Holocaust, Brazilian poet. Here, a question arises whether the “looking back into a troubled past” can still constitute an exhaustive explanation to the aesthetic representation of the Holocaust in contemporary literature.

I would like to suggest approaching these differences – both historical and poetic – from a linguistic point of view. The most obvious difference between Celan and Sarmatz is that the latter’s lament is written *in a different language than the one it mourns*. Sarmatz thematises this difference and turns it into the poetic core of his poem. To put it in literal terms, the question whether one’s own mother tongue can be used as a mouthpiece for that of his grandmother, or in a more general manner, is commemoration possible from the particular – geographical, historical and lingual position to which he belongs – posits Sarmatz’s poetics in a space distinct from both recalling, and Hirsch’s notion of *Postmemory*. The poet’s question on the first stanza, “Onde haverá céu para suportar tantas vozes elevadas?,” can, from this perspective, be seen not as a mere rhetorical wailing, but as a concrete query about this very possibility – or in effect, translatability.

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Sidra Ezrahi’s discussion of the share of “imaginative investment, projection or creation” in first-generation Holocaust literature (Ezrahi, 1989), or, for a more general discussion, Freud’s self-revision of his early theory of sexuality.



A focus on language recharges our understanding of the poem with the conditions of the present, manifested as the gap between what is said, and the means of saying it. The loss of Yiddish is not a metaphorical one, nor “someone else’s”, but is the poet’s personal lack of-, incapability to participate in- and, by implication, to separate from a certain tradition, manifested by the ‘transposition/translation’ of Celan’s poetics to Portuguese. The gap between a language that speaks *about*, and a language that speaks *in* does not only posit the lyrical “I” in a suspended distance from the “dead language,” but also testifies for a set of conditions and limitations that are bound to the living one.

In this context Sarmatz’s poem makes an indicative differentiation between one language and another, looking at both from a structural perspective, and considering similarity, as well as distance and exile, from that perspective. The third stanza describes the latter:

Palavras não são coisas nem pessoas.  
São um nada, uma piada, uma praga, um lamento surdo  
um exílio.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding pushes the question of belonging to the front – expressed in the poem in terms of *a common language* to which one pertains, in which one creates and apprehends meaning. The declaration “words are neither things, nor subjects” points at meaning not as something words possess or “have,” but as the outcome of the relation between them, i.e. as a sense of “belonging” to a structure or a system. The inherent stress on belonging also implies that the isolated word – the word that is a remnant of an eclipsed structure from which it is now exiled – is the equivalent of “nothing” (here, the English ‘nothing’ may be understood quite literally), while the fact that its lament is “deaf” is faithful to the fundamental distinction between life and death, expressed as a dead language’s impossibility to speak in the world of the living: “boca contra boca ouvido contra ouvido/ boca e olvido”<sup>11</sup> – such words can at most be uttered, testifying for what’s forgotten by being drown out, but not partake in a dialogue in which a meaning or a message has to be transmitted from one’s mouth, to another’s ear.

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<sup>10</sup> “Words are neither things, nor beings.  
They are nothing, a joke, a plague, a deaf lament  
An exile.”

<sup>11</sup> “mouth-to-mouth ear-to-ear  
mouth and oblivion”

Accordingly, the choice made at the end of Sarmatz's poem is guided by a wish that fuses together the meaning of "living" and of belonging, or of being able to speak and to converse:

*se eu mastigasse as palavras, e delas um suco que não fosse áspero  
escorresse abrindo os diques da memória,  
irrigando os rios-palavras,  
fertilizando campos do idioma —  
aí sim: eu estaria mais só do que já estou.*<sup>12</sup>

Written in the conjunctive, what seems to be a possibility to resurrect a dead language is, in effect, an acceptance or even a confession of one's inability to cross the sluice between life and death – to enter, as a living speaker, the world of the dead without becoming one. This is also the first moment in the poem where a first person singular is employed – right when the I's unity and coherence is threatened and forces a choice. Bound to his mother tongue, Sarmatz is unable to 'chew the words' of a dead language – possibly referring to Celan's poetic technique – as long as he wishes to avoid an even greater loneliness than the one of an 'expatriate in his own land': that of a 'dead among the living.'

Previous research (Santana Júnior, 2012) has examined exemplary intertextualities this poem establishes with several of Celan's poems, emphasizing on the inspiration it draws from Celan's tropes and metaphoric work: the "sewed mouths" and the lines "mouth-to-mouth ear-to-ear/ mouth and oblivion" (bocas costuradas"; ""boca contra boca ouvido contra ouvido / boca e olvido") connotes to Celan's *Tenebrae* ("Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.;" "Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord." (GW 1:163, English translation in Felstiner, 101)); The "worm, earth and vernacular" ("verme, terra e vernáculo") alludes to Celan's *Es war Erde in ihnen* ("Es kam eine Stille, es kam auch ein Sturm,/ es kamen die Meere alle./ Ich grabe, du gräbst, und es gräbt auch der Wurm,/ und das Singende dort sagt: Sie graben.;" "There came there a stillness, there came also storm,/ all of the oceans came./ I dig, you dig, and the worm also digs,/ And the singing there says: They dig." (GW 1:211, English translation in Felstiner, 151)); and the pondering, 'where to find sky to support the many elevated voices' ("Onde haverá céu para suportar tantas vozes elevadas?") to the "grave

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<sup>12</sup> "If I could speak to shadows,  
If I had chewed the words, and a sleek juice would have streamed from them,  
Opening the sluices of memory,  
Washing the word-rivers,  
Fertilizing language fields –  
then: I would have been lonelier than I already am."

in the air” in the famous *Todesfuge* (“wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng”; “we shovel a grave in the air there you won’t lie too cramped”). GW 1:41, English translation in Felstiner, 31).

Yet, as in the case of the sluice I have mentioned earlier, an intertextual analysis reveals not only the similar semantic and metaphoric fields, internalized and articulated by Sarmatz – but also the differences in the positioning of the poetic voice of each of the poets. In a poem of the titled *Die Schleuse* (“The Sluice”) from 1960, Celan addresses a similar sluice to the one Sarmatz describes as impossible to cross – yet while depicting it as one he *has* to cross, over and over again, in order to rescue the words he lost:

Durch  
die Schleuse must ich,  
das Wort in die Salzflut zurück-  
und hinaus- und hinüberzuretten:

Jiskor.  
(GW, 1:222).<sup>13</sup>

In Celan’s poem, the metaphor of the sluice and its crossing is an expression of the fusion between life and death: the “I” is alive, but is obliged to death – and therefore the poet rebuilds the world of the dead as a language. As agreed among the majority of Celan scholars, this language couldn’t have been any other than German – or more accurately, any other than the German that was and remained Celan’s mother tongue, on the one hand; that was conditioned by the holocaust on the other, and that was then strained by Celan to its limits – in a way, until the possibility to save a single Hebrew word: *Yizkor* (“remembrance”), the prayer orphans recite over their parent’s graves. The well-known biographer of Celan, John Felstiner explains:

Celan has become an exemplary postwar poet because he insistently registered in German the catastrophe made in Germany. With his world obliterated, he held fast to the mother tongue that was both his and the

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<sup>13</sup> “Through  
The sluice I had to go,  
To salvage the word back into  
and out of and across the salt flood:

Yizkor”

(English translation in Felstiner, 162)

murderers' – literally all he had left. Insofar as it was language that had been damaged, his verse might repair that damage. (xvii).

*Die Schleuse* expresses this condition as the loss of two words, enumerated previously in the poem – a German word, *Schwester* (sister), and a Hebrew one, *Kaddish* – that were “lost” to the Third Reich and to a crisis in faith, respectively. The outcome is a bilingual poetics in a language that trespasses while being trespassed, that “has to interrupt itself to say something” (Bear) and that, despite the word it “finds” over the sluice, offers no redemption.

From this point of view, the translation of a “Celianian” poetics to Portuguese is understood, at least in part, as a rejection of Celan’s “gift” – and even alludes to Derrida’s understanding of the gift as an aporia. (1992) Sarmatz’s choice in life expresses a rejection of Celan’s isolating language in favor of one that allows communication and belonging. Similarly to Celan, Sarmatz’s lyric evokes the myth of Orpheus – yet while Celan enacts a return to the underworld in order to rescue a word, rather than a person (which, as noted by Kligerman, makes him play, more than the role of Orpheus, that of Charon – “the conveyer of shades to the underworld”, 133), Sarmatz’s “lyre” recognizes the impossibility to bring death back to life, and “turns it’s back” to it, creating unity in form and language. The lyrical I is not split or divided, but complex. The poem makes room for this complexity to be expressed while maintaining the integrity of the I, and thus bears the possibility to remember while *differing* from death, by echoing it in a ‘foreign’ language.

The discussion concerning the two poetic systems expresses a deep philosophical cleavage between the two languages: the first cannot forget, the second must remember, but does so while allowing its foreignness to exist and be heard. Sarmatz’s hiss “in front of the mirror” from the opening line of “Logocausto” should stand against Celan’s treatment of commemoration in *Vor Einer Kerze* (“in front of a candle”) from 1955: while a man watching his face in the mirror is indeed alone, but also present, witnessing his own existence – Celan, in a way, had no mirror other than the candle, other than what the candle signifies, namely the existence of memory or the sign itself.

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